

I never wanted to hear that word 'effects,' except in normal conversation. I didn't want to hear about Operational Net Assessment. We would not get caught up in any of these mechanistic processes. We would use the wisdom, the experience, and the good judgment of the people we had."

This kind of management system clearly has its risks. It meant Van Riper didn't always have a clear idea of what his troops were up to. It meant he had to place a lot of trust in his subordinates. It was, by his own admission, a "messy" way to make decisions. But it had one overwhelming advantage: allowing people to operate without having to explain themselves constantly turns out to be like the rule of agreement in improv. It enables rapid cognition.

→ Let me give you a very simple example of this. Picture, in your mind, the face of the waiter or waitress who served you the last time you ate at a restaurant, or the person who sat next to you on the bus today. Any stranger whom you've seen recently will do. Now, if I were to ask you to pick that person out of a police lineup, could you do it? I suspect you could. Recognizing someone's face is a classic example of unconscious cognition. We don't have to think about it. Faces just pop into our minds. But suppose I were to ask you to take a pen and paper and write down in as much detail as you can what your person looks like. Describe her face. What color was her hair? What was she wearing? Was she wearing any jewelry? Believe it or not, you will now do a lot worse at picking that face out of a lineup. This is because the act of describing a face has the effect of impairing your

wise effortless ability to subsequently recognize that face. The psychologist Jonathan W. Schooler, who pioneered research on this effect, calls it verbal overshadowing. Your brain has a part (the left hemisphere) that works in words, and a part (the right hemisphere) that works in pictures, and what happened when you described the face in words was that your actual visual memory was displaced. Your thinking was bumped from the right to the left hemisphere. When you were faced with the lineup the second time around, what you were drawing on was your memory of what you said the waitress looked like, not your memory of what you saw she looked like. And that's a problem because when it comes to faces, we are an awful lot better at visual recognition than we are at verbal description. If I were to show you a picture of Marilyn Monroe or Albert Einstein, you'd recognize both faces in a fraction of a second. My guess is that right now you can "see" them both almost perfectly in your imagination. But how accurately can you describe them? If you wrote a paragraph on Marilyn Monroe's face, without telling me whom you were writing about, could I guess who it was? We all have an instinctive memory for faces. But by forcing you to verbalize that memory—to explain yourself—I separate you from those instincts.

Recognizing faces sounds like a very specific process, but Schooler has shown that the implications of verbal overshadowing carry over to the way we solve much broader problems. Consider the following puzzle:

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Recognizing
faces?

Can you
describe who
served you in
the cafeteria?

A man and his son are in a serious car accident. The father is killed, and the son is rushed to the emergency room. Upon arrival, the attending doctor looks at the child and gasps, "This child is my son!" Who is the doctor?

This is an insight puzzle. It's not like a math or a logic problem that can be worked out systematically with pencil and paper. The only way you can get the answer is if it comes to you suddenly in the blink of an eye. You need to make a leap beyond the automatic assumption that doctors are always men. They aren't always, of course. The doctor is the boy's mother! Here's another insight puzzle:

A giant inverted steel pyramid is perfectly balanced on its point. Any movement of the pyramid will cause it to topple over. Underneath the pyramid is a \$100 bill. How do you remove the bill without disturbing the pyramid?

Think about this problem for a few moments. Then, after a minute or so, write down, in as much detail as you can, everything you can remember about how you were trying to solve the problem—your strategy, your approach, or any solutions you've thought of. When Schooler did this experiment with a whole sheet of insight puzzles, he found that people who were asked to explain themselves ended up solving *30 percent* fewer problems than those who weren't. In short, when you write down your

thoughts, your chances of having the flash of insight you need in order to come up with a solution are significantly impaired—just as describing the face of your waitress made you unable to pick her out of a police lineup. (The solution to the pyramid problem, by the way, is to destroy the bill in some way—tear it or burn it.)

With a logic problem, asking people to explain themselves doesn't impair their ability to come up with the answers. In some cases, in fact, it may help. But problems that require a flash of insight operate by different rules. "It's the same kind of paralysis through analysis you find in sports contexts," Schooler says. "When you start becoming reflective about the process, it undermines your ability. You lose the flow. There are certain kinds of fluid, intuitive, nonverbal kinds of experience that are vulnerable to this process." As human beings, we are capable of extraordinary leaps of insight and instinct. We can hold a face in memory, and we can solve a puzzle in a flash. But what Schooler is saying is that all these abilities are incredibly fragile. Insight is not a lightbulb that goes off inside our heads. It is a flickering candle that can easily be snuffed out.

Gary Klein, the decision-making expert, once did an interview with a fire department commander in Cleveland as part of a project to get professionals to talk about times when they had to make tough, split-second decisions. The story the fireman told was about a seemingly routine call he had taken years before, when he was a lieutenant. The fire was in the back of a one-story house in a residential neighborhood, in the kitchen. The lieutenant and his men broke down the